

# History TODAY

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Lady Countess of Oxford  
with the Countess of Pembroke  
daughter of Duke of Buckingham



*The British Lion and Indian Tiger watch apprehensively as the Russian Bear attacks the Afghan Wolf.  
Punch cartoon of April 1885*

# The Panjdeh Crisis, 1885

Russian advances in Central Asia alarmed the British authorities in London as well as in India

J. M. Brereton

**A**N INSIGNIFICANT mud-built caravanserai remote in an oasis south of the great Qara Qum desert of Central Asia, Panjdeh was for centuries unknown except to nomadic Turkmen tribesmen and a few caravan merchants making to or from the Afghan city of Herat, some hundred miles to the south. Yet for a few months in 1885 its name was echoed in the corridors of Whitehall and St Petersburg, and it took on a significance that nearly equalled Sarajevo's in 1914.

After the end of the Second Afghan War in 1880, Britain was confident that she had established a buffer state between her Indian empire

and the expanding Tsarist dominions in Turkestan. As Disraeli put it, 'a scientific frontier' had at last been secured, and Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, who had been set on the throne of Kabul by British arms, seemed co-operative in fulfilling his treaty obligations.

For nearly two decades London and Calcutta had viewed with alarm that at times amounted to near-paranoia the steady advance of Russia towards the Amu Darya, or Oxus, and the frontier of Afghanistan. Samarkand and Bokhara had fallen in 1869, Khiva in 1873, and by 1881 Tsarist troops had occupied the oasis of Gök Tepe, on the main caravan route to the strategic

city of Merv. Lying only 130 miles from Afghan territory, (although the actual frontier was still undefined), Merv was long regarded as the jumping-off point for any advance south to Herat. In the wake of the military came the Trans-Caspian Railway, and when this had been extended to Gök Tepe it meant that whole Russian divisions could entrain at St Petersburg and in less than a week be deployed a couple of days' march from Afghanistan. A hundred years ago such a development in strategic mobility was equivalent to a lightning air-lift of today. It now seemed inevitable to the British that Russia's next move would be the seizure of Merv. Ten years previously Sir Henry Rawlinson, bellicose advocate of Britain's 'Forward Policy', had been dubbed a scaremonger when he asserted that Russia's advance to the very frontiers of India was 'as certain as the movement of the sun in the heavens'. Now there were ominous signs that his prophecy might come true.

Meanwhile, there had been constant flurries of diplomatic activity between London and St Petersburg: the Russian Foreign Minister, Nicolai Giers, assured his opposite number, Lord Granville, that the Tsar had no designs on Merv, let alone on Afghanistan, and he repeated the pledge given by his Government to Lord Lytton before the Second Afghan War, that Russia regarded Afghanistan as 'completely outside her sphere of influence'. He also pointed out that Russia had not made any move when Britain herself had invaded Afghanistan, nor had his Government thought fit to protest when a British railway was pushed up towards Quetta and the Afghan border. He refrained from reminding the British Government that ten years previously the Viceroy of India, Lord Lytton, had strongly advocated a 'Forward movement' of British troops right across Afghanistan to garrison frontier posts on the very banks of the Oxus River. And of course Monsieur Giers forebore to mention the words of the firebrand Tsarist commander in central Asia, General Mikhail Skobelev, who wrote in a memorandum to St Petersburg: 'In the end it will be our duty to organize masses of Asiatic cavalry and hurl them into India as a vanguard,

under the banner of blood and rapine, thereby reviving the times of Timur Leng.' If this were done, he forecast, 'India would rise in rebellion; the Indian army would be so absorbed in keeping order that the passes of the North-West Frontier would be left wide open. If we were successful in our enterprise, we should entirely demolish the British empire in India.'

Skobelev seems to have been a nineteenth century Genghis Khan (he slaughtered some 10,000 Turkmen women and children on the capture of Gök Tepe); but, fortunately for both Britain and Russia, although he had great influence at the Court of St Petersburg, his lust for blood was kept under a tight rein. Tsar Alexander II was realist enough to recognize that full-scale hostilities with the British in Asia would certainly provoke similar hostilities on his European frontiers. Ironically, the Tsar fell to a Nihilist's bullet in 1881, while Skobelev died peacefully (from over-drinking and over-exertion, it was said) the following year, aged only thirty-eight.

The new Tsar, Alexander III, continued the policy of appeasement with Britain, reiterating that he had no territorial ambitions in Afghanistan. Gladstone and his anti-imperialist Liberal Government were only too willing to credit Russian promises, particularly as at the moment they were preoccupied with events in the Sudan. In India the Viceroy, Lord Ripon, was congratulating himself on the friendly relations he had established with Abdur Rahman, who (encouraged by a British subsidy of £120,000 a year) was strictly adhering to the agreed policy of non-alignment with Russia. For the time being, the bogey across the Oxus was shelved and it seemed that the Great Game had reached a tacit draw. Then came the bomb-shell. On February 14th, 1884, the Russian Government announced that their troops had occupied Merv, or as General Komarov telegraphed to the Tsar, the Turkmen of Merv had 'declared themselves unconditionally subjects of Your Majesty'. Ten days later Lord Granville sent an indignant despatch to St Petersburg, recalling the repeated assurances by the Russian Government that they had no designs on Merv: it was 'entirely inconsistent with the



*Above: Major-General Sir Peter Lumsden welcomed to the Panjdeh area by the Governor of Herat; engraving from the 'Illustrated London News', November 1884. Below: The Amir Abdur Rahman with the Duke of Connaught (centre) and the Viceroy of India, Lord Dufferin (right); engraving from the 'Illustrated London News', May 1885*



whole tenor of the mutual explanations between the two Governments, that one of them should take a step which appears to be in contradiction with the assurances which have on so many occasions been received both from the Emperor and his Government, without any previous communication of their change of views'. In such-like ponderous and tortuous terms the British Foreign Secretary expressed his 'surprise' and 'sadness' that the Russians had failed to honour their word. Even then there were Western politicians who believed that a Russian promise was worth anything more than the paper it was written on. The reply from St Petersburg was totally uncompromising. M. Giers once again stressed that his Government had abstained from protest when Britain had steadily increased her sphere of influence along her Indian frontiers, and in Afghanistan itself: they 'had a right to expect the consideration for the freedom of the decisions demanded by the interests of Russia'.

At Westminster there was mixed reaction to the *coup de main*. While Gladstone's Cabinet agitatedly discussed possible counter-measures, a member of the Commons declared that the Russians should be told 'in the clearest possible manner that if they attacked Afghanistan in any way, if they intrigued with the Amir at Kabul, such action would be detrimental to the interests of this country and that it would be a *casus belli*'. But others pointed out that some 130 miles of desolation separated Merv from the Afghan frontier; that so far all Russia had done was to bring a system of ordered government and stable civilization to a group of lawless Asian khanates whose rulers were little more than bloody tyrants. In the House of Lords the Duke of Argyll mockingly accused the scaremongers of suffering from a fit of 'Mervousness' – a term that was joyfully seized upon by the Press. The Russian Ambassador in London uttered soothing platitudes, emphasizing to Lord Granville 'the great difficulty which both Russian and English statesmen had always acknowledged to exist for a civilized Power to stop short in the extension of its territory where uncivilized tribes were its immediate neighbours'. Russia, as much as Britain, was only



General Ghaus-ud-Din, commander of the Afghan troops at Panjdeh, with his soldiers; engraving from the 'Illustrated London News'

seeking a firm frontier for her empire.

And this, perhaps, was the crux of the problem: where was that frontier? The waste of desert and swamp that separated the spheres of influence of Merv and Herat had long been a disputed no-man's-land. There had never been any attempt to demarcate a political border between northern Afghanistan and what were originally the independent Turkmen khanates; and the nomadic tribesmen who inhabited these parts were contemptuous of frontiers, anyway. But Amir Abdur Rahman claimed that the oasis of Panjdeh, almost midway between Herat and Merv, was Afghan territory, and maintained that the Turkmen peoples of the area had always paid tribute to the Afghans of Herat rather than to the rulers of Merv. But Merv at last stirred the British Government into action. With the full concurrence of Abdur Rahman, it was proposed that a joint Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission should meet in the disputed territory and settle the problem. St Petersburg agreed, and in July 1884 General Sir Peter Lumsden was appointed to lead the British Commission.

It was November before Sir Peter arrived in the Panjdeh area, and by that time Afghans and Russians had begun snarling at each other. Determined to stake a good claim for himself, Abdur Rahman had precipitately pushed a brigade of troops into the Panjdeh oasis: a move that was promptly countered by the Russian commander, General Komarov, with an advance to the Hari Rud river at Pul-i-Khatun, less than twelve miles from Panjdeh. When Lumsden reached the scene he found that the opposing commanders were now indulging in a slanging match. Komarov wrote to General Ghaus-ud-Din calling him 'a liar and a coward', and the Afghan responded by describing Komarov as 'a liar, a coward and a thief'. Lumsden could only call upon both to desist from such ungentlemanly conduct, urging Ghaus-ud-Din not to 'imitate the impolite language of the Russian'. At this juncture a note was received from the Russian H.Q. at Merv regretting that their Commissioner, General Zelenoi, had been 'unavoidably delayed' and would not be able to meet Lumsden until the spring. Obviously, thought Lumsden, this was

a deliberate manoeuvre to permit the Russians to deploy their troops into a better bargaining position. For the next few months – until March 1885 – the two sides sat and glared at each other while the British Commission and escort of 500 Indian troops commanded by Lieut-Colonel West Ridgeway chafed and shivered through the bitter winter under canvas.

Meanwhile, diplomatic activity continued. On March 14th Sir Edward Thornton, British Ambassador at St Petersburg, warned Giers that a Russian attack on Panjdeh could result in 'disastrous consequences'; and on March 28th he went further: any advance towards Afghanistan would be regarded by Her Majesty's Government as tantamount to a declaration of war between Britain and Russia. In a hurt note Giers replied that he had 'no information whatever' about any proposed attack on Panjdeh, while in London Mr Gladstone informed the House that the Russian Government had given formal assurance that no further advance of her troops would be sanctioned.

But even as this dialogue proceeded, tension increased around Panjdeh. By March 30th, it had reached breaking point. Despite the cautionings of Lumsden and Ridgeway, Ghaus-ud-Din had advanced his troops to a low mound known as Ak Tapa ('White Hill'), some six miles south-east of Panjdeh. Less than a mile to the west, Komarov had occupied another feature, Kizil Tapa ('Red Hill'), and between the two positions ran the Kushk River, crossed by the ancient brick-built bridge of Pul-i-khisti. In a reckless display of bravado, Ghaus-ud-Din then crossed the Kushk River and dug in his force almost under the noses of the Russians on Kizil Tapa. This force consisted of 1200 Kabuli and Kandahari infantry with six 6-pounder guns, and 800 irregular cavalry held in reserve on the banks of the river. Facing them were Komarov's 4,000 Russian infantry with Turkmen and Cossack cavalry supported by eight 6- and 12-pounder guns.

The Afghan provocation proved too much for Komarov. As the dawn mists were smoking off the river on March 31st, his guns opened on



GENERAL ALEXANDER KOMAROV, *Governor-General of the Trans-Caspian provinces; from the 'Illustrated London News'*



Radio Times Picture Library

*The incident of March 31st, 1885. Fleeing Afghans try to recross the Kushk River over the Pul-i-Khisti bridge, but are cut down by Russian cavalry*

the Afghan cavalry, sending them struggling back across the river in panic-stricken fragments. Then the yelling Cossack and Turkmen horsemen swept forward, followed by lines of Russian infantry. Hopelessly outnumbered, the Afghans had no chance: they broke and fled for the river, where some 200 were shot down as they jammed the Pul-i-khisti bridge. By mid-day, the remnants, led by the valiant Ghausud-Din, were fleeing along the Hari Rud river towards Herat, and the Panjdeh oasis was in Russian hands.

The news electrified the British Government. In the House Gladstone demanded a war credit of £11 million, and the Commander-in-Chief in India, Sir Donald Stewart, was ordered to mobilize immediately two Army Corps under General Sir Frederick Roberts and move them up to Quetta. It so happened that on the very day on which the Russians seized Panjdeh, the Afghan ruler was being welcomed at Rawalpindi on a formal visit to Lord Dufferin, who had succeeded Lord Ripon as Viceroy in 1884. He had consistently warned the British Government about the Russian advances, but to no effect. He added that the Afghan defeat was entirely due to their 'inferior' weaponry (mostly

supplied by Britain). He did, however, agree that a group of British engineer officers should be sent forthwith to Herat, to improve the city's defences.

It now really seemed that Britain and Russia were on the brink of war. The Duke of Cambridge, C.-in-C. of the British Army, noted in his diary: 'I cannot see how, after this, that war can be avoided.' But he hoped the Government would stand firm 'and not give way to Russian "assurances", which are worthless'.

But Tsar Alexander drew back. Sensing that even the peace-loving Gladstone now meant business, he ordered the withdrawal of the Russian forces from Panjdeh and agreed that the problem of which side had violated the agreement not to advance from positions held on March 16th should be referred to 'the judgement of a friendly state'. In the relatively temperate climate that followed, this detail was shelved in favour of the more pressing matter of continuing the Boundary Commission's task. Feeling frustrated by the negotiations proceeding over his head, Sir Peter Lumsden resigned, and his place was taken by Lieut-Colonel Ridgeway in November 1885. This officer's personality and tact made a happy impression



Colonel Sir West Ridgeway, British Commissioner, and Colonel Zühlburg, Russian Commissioner, at Zulfikar, November 12th, 1885, fixing the site of the first boundary post

on both Russians and Afghans, and it was under him that in June 1886 the joint Commission agreed on the boundary up to a point thirty miles short of the Oxus. This area remained in dispute until July the following year, when Colonel Sir West Ridgeway (as he had then become) arrived at an agreement with the Tsar in St Petersburg, defining the whole frontier of northern Afghanistan between the Hari Rud and Oxus rivers.

As for that insignificant oasis that precipitated the whole affair, Panjdeh was ceded to Russia in return for the equally insignificant post of Zulfikar on the Hari Rud river. Today New Panjdeh lies in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Turkmenistan, some eight miles from the extension of the Trans-Caspian Railway that now stops just short of the Afghan border of Kushka. No more than a small village, it still seems an unlikely *casus belli*. And it is ironic that long after the Great Game was forgotten, the threat of Russian domination over Afghanistan should once more erupt with violence, not across the Oxus, but within the Afghan frontiers.

## POSTSCRIPT

Until 1885 one of the most historic and beautiful features of Herat was the splendid fifteenth-century Musalla mosque of Gauhar Shad (gifted Queen of Shah Rukh) with its complex of domes and minarets covered with superb faience work. Today only the shrine of Gauhar Shad and a few slender minarets remain – forming a landmark for travellers motoring from the Persian or Soviet borders. Nearly all topographers and historians have alleged that this magnificent example of Timurid architecture was deliberately destroyed by British artillery under Sir Peter Lumsden's orders, so as to clear a field of fire for the Herat defences. As pointed out by Sir Olaf Caroe in *Asian Affairs* (October 1973), the facts are otherwise. It is true that the Mussala had to suffer in the interests of defence; but it is on record, says Sir Olaf, that it was Amir Abdur Rahman (no amateur of art or architecture) who gave explicit orders for the destruction, which was carried out, not by British guns, but by Afghan demolition teams advised by engineers of Ridgeway's Commission.